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Is America learning in Iran?

It is disappointing but not altogether surprising that Leonid Brezhnev should have tried to exploit the turbulent events in Iran with a warning to the United States not to involve itself militarily. A more restrained posture would have been more in keeping with the policy of détente. Hence President Carter was right to be so quick in responding to Mr. Brezhnev's gratuitous and unjustified warning by a public statement that the United States "does not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of any country."

Mr. Carter's course in Iran has in fact been most cautious these past few weeks. Although the Shah's mistakes of leadership and judgment are now shown to have been glaring, the United States has chosen to support him publicly even while standing on the sidelines as he wages a determined battle to survive. The policy seems the most prudent one. Most observers fear that the fall of the Shah would result either in a government of the Muslim right or the radical left, neither of which would last and which would only lead to a military coup and the installation of a right-wing regime perhaps even more repressive.

But this is not to suggest that the United States does not have some soul-searching to do. If the Iranian ruler must analyze what went wrong and what can be done to rectify it, so must Washington. One of the most damaging revelations is the lack of hard intelligence which the US had about developments in Iran. A New York Times report quotes Washington officials as saying that when the rioting broke out last summer almost nothing was known about the various groups opposing the Shah.

It is self-evident that if the White House had known earlier of the magnitude of popular discontent building in the provinces, it could have warned the Shah about going too far too fast. He might have stepped up the pace of liberalization and instituted those reforms that he must now contemplate if he is to succeed in holding power.

That is hindsight, of course, and the need now is to strengthen intelligence gathering in the State Department and other agencies of

government. CIA director Stansfield Turner has taken an early positive step by acknowledging that his agency "would have liked to have done better" in Iran and setting up a new CIA "warning" post to concentrate on potentially volatile areas.

Other lessons can be assimilated, too. The Carter administration has now seen firsthand the difficulty of holding together a traditional autocracy, especially when it tries to break the power of the clergy, rides roughshod over people's cultural traditions and at the same time fails to satisfy aspirations for greater political freedom. These are factors that ought to be considered when decisions are made to pour such massive military and economic aid into an autocratically ruled country.

It is not too soon for the foreign policy establishment in Washington to begin re-examining other areas of the world where a push for modernization with Western help and support of a dictator in the process might one day provoke violent social upheaval.